

UK BAHÁ'Í REVIEW

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'ABDU'L-BAHÁ IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
BAHÁ'ÍS MARK HISTORIC CENTENARY

ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

People everywhere yearn for an end to the conflict, poverty and suffering so prevalent across the planet. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh offer a vision of peace and human prosperity in the fullest sense – an awakening to the possibilities of spiritual and material well-being.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith – which began in 1844 – compares humankind to the fruits of one single tree and the diverse and beautiful flowers of a single garden. He wrote that, “The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.”

There is no possibility of achieving world peace until the fundamental principle of unity has been accepted and given practical effect in the organization of society. Bahá'u'lláh further said that, “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship... So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.” The unity that must underpin a peaceful and just social order embraces diversity. Oneness and diversity are complementary and inseparable. Acceptance of the concept of unity in diversity implies the development of a sense of world citizenship and a love for all of humanity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), son of Bahá'u'lláh, said that “The diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord.” Humanity's need will not be met by a struggle among competing ambitions or by protest against the countless wrongs afflicting a desperate age. It calls for a fundamental change of consciousness, for a wholehearted embrace of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching, that the time has come when each human being on earth must accept responsibility for the welfare of all.

In the Bahá'í view, the body of humankind is one and indivisible, each member of the race is born into the world as a trust of the whole. This trusteeship constitutes the moral foundation of most of the other rights, principally economic and social. The security of the family and the home, the ownership of property, and the right to privacy are all implied in such a trusteeship. The obligations on the part of the community extend to the provision of employment, mental and physical health care, social security, fair wages, rest and recreation, and a host of other reasonable expectations on the part of the individual members of society.

The world civilisation envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh will take centuries to build. And building it will take the commitment of all humankind, starting in neighbourhoods and villages. Bahá'ís are committed to creating this spiritual community, in which principles such as the oneness of humankind, of religion, the equality of the sexes, and the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth become reality.

Today, the Bahá'í Faith is the world's secondmost widespread religion, and the Bahá'í International Community enjoys consultative status at the United Nations.

OPENING REMARKS

Welcome to the winter edition of the *UK Bahá'í Review*. The Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom is pleased to share with you news of some activities from the past year and our reflections on recent events.

It has been a busy year for the Bahá'í community. 2011 marked the centenary of a visit to the UK by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of Bahá'u'lláh and Head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1892 to 1921. Bahá'í communities across the country, and indeed around the world are also forging ahead with the community-building activities that typify a Bahá'í approach to service to society. Bahá'ís and their friends have spent the year focusing their energies on growing and strengthening devotional gatherings, children and junior youth classes, and circles of study, in their local neighbourhoods. Mindful of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example of selfless servitude, they are accelerating their efforts to promote the wellbeing of society.

In April, after a statement of support from David Cameron, the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary William Hague called on the Iranian judiciary to deal fairly with seven former leaders of the Iranian Bahá'í community, who had each been sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. Mr Hague's intervention was attended by a string of articles in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal Europe*, condemning Iran's appalling human rights record.

Over the summer, ongoing attacks against the Bahá'ís in Iran, and their informal higher education institute, drew more public outcry. In October, an open letter signed by more than 40 distinguished philosophers and theologians was published in the *Daily Telegraph*, calling on Iran to honour its human rights obligations. Interviews with former students of the programme also appeared in *Times Higher Education*.

“Can You Solve This”, a university campaign launched in September, encouraged thousands of students to write to the UK Foreign Secretary and an Iranian minister, to support Bahá'ís and others who are denied higher education in Iran.

Do please contact us with any questions by writing to opa@bahai.org.uk

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ IN THE UK

Son of the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, and later Head of the Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's UK visit was an historic achievement.

Bahá'ís throughout the country, and indeed the whole world, are celebrating the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the UK from 4 September to 3 October 1911. This sojourn was part of a remarkable three-year expedition to the West, in which by word and deed He diffused the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, His father and Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, to multitudes of people across the entire spectrum of Western society. In accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been appointed as Head of the Bahá'í Faith in 1892. He was the perfect exemplar and authoritative interpreter of His Father's teachings.

'Abdu'l-Bahá endured, alongside His Father, decades of exile and incarceration. Yet His life was distinguished by extraordinary achievements: His stewardship of the Bahá'í community after Bahá'u'lláh's passing; His expositions on advancing civilization; His efforts to establish the spiritual and administrative headquarters of the Faith in Haifa, then Palestine; His sacrificial protection of local populations from famine during the First World War, for which He was awarded a Knighthood; and the love, wisdom, and care He imparted to all, regardless of their background or beliefs. 'Abdu'l-Bahá inspired thousands, a century ago, and is the example of a Bahá'í life for millions today.

Confined for 40 years to a penal colony in Palestine, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was freed as a result of the Young Turks Revolution in 1908. In 1911, despite His age and health, 'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled to the West to spread the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh – an historic act crucial to the establishment of the Faith in the West. For two years, in the UK, Europe and North America, at churches, mosques, synagogues, at philanthropic organizations, and at informal gatherings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke of the social and spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. In 1911, He warned repeatedly of the war that would engulf Europe. Press reports and interviews drew much attention to the Faith. The few and fledgling western Bahá'í communities were invigorated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's charismatic and transformative influence.

'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in the UK on 4 September 1911, for the first of two visits. He faced unfamiliar surroundings, spoke no English, and had never given a public address. And yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá accepted the invitation of the pioneering Christian minister, Rev. Richard Campbell, to address the congregation at City Temple, Holborn, on 10 September. 'Abdu'l-Bahá proclaimed (through translation) to an audience of 2,000 that a new age had dawned, an age in which humanity would become one, the religions would be reconciled, and peace and justice would be established.

The following week, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at St John's Church, Westminster. Archdeacon Wilberforce, in his introduction, quoted Rudyard Kipling's famous line, that

"East is East, and West is West and never the twain shall meet". But the Archdeacon said that, "they can and do meet on the common ground of Love and here is the proof. Look at our wonderful guest of tonight who has suffered 40 years of imprisonment for the sake of humanity ... because of His Message of Love and Unity to all peoples."

'Abdu'l-Bahá took the pulpit, offering proofs for the unknowability of God, the need for prophets to come from God to guide humanity, and the oneness of these Divine educators. At the end, Wilberforce said that, "Truly the East and the West have met in this sacred place tonight."

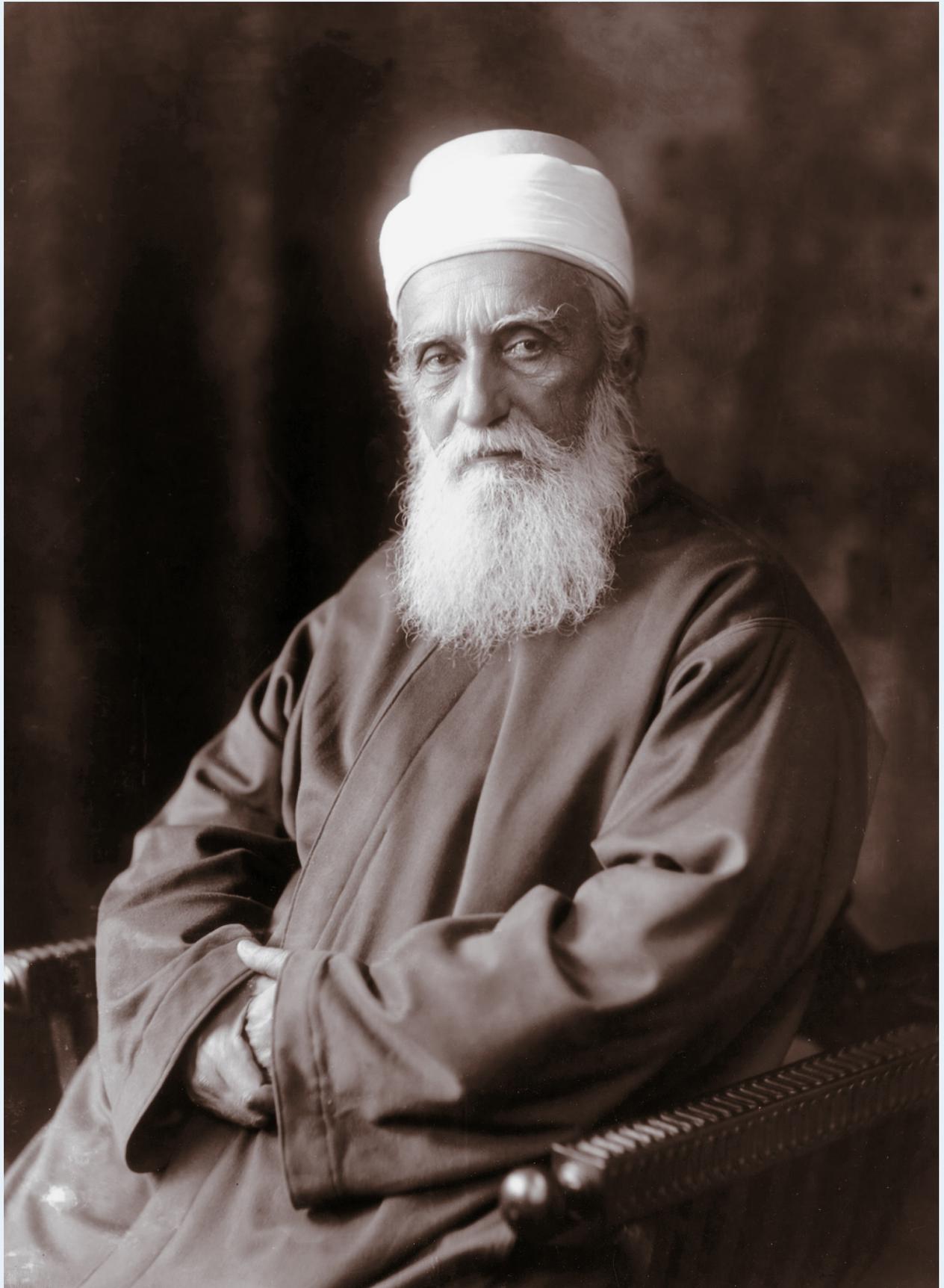
In London, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stayed at the home Lady Blomfield, a British Bahá'í. There and elsewhere, He met prominent people, including Professor Michael Sadler, an eminent reformer of British education; Annie Besant, president of the Theosophical Society; Claude Montefiore, the Jewish theologian and philanthropist; Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, a suffragette leader; Sir Thomas Strong, Lord Mayor of London; and Platon Drakoules, a founder of the Humanitarian League. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also travelled to Bristol and stayed at the home of Wellesley Tudor Pole, a mystic attracted to Bahá'í teachings.

For each person, He shared Bahá'í teachings that related to their interests. To all without distinction, He imparted love, wisdom, comfort – whatever the particular need. Uncompromising in defence of the truth, yet infinitely gentle in manner, He brought the universal divine principles to bear on the exigencies of the age.

'Abdu'l-Bahá showed great interest in philanthropic causes, such as the Passmore Edwards settlement where working women were supported and the first fully equipped classrooms for children with disabilities were pioneered; and religious movements, such as the Theosophists, at whose meeting He spoke.

It is a century since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first visit to the UK, yet His words in 1911 are still entirely relevant to society. Religion should be the cause of love and unity, not of disharmony and hatred; women need to be educated equally with men and take their place alongside them in the professions, arts and society; religion and science are interconnected truths and are not inherently in conflict; and human beings must abandon traditions that cause division and conflict, searching instead for truth with an open mind and with the use of reason. Human beings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, should look beyond prejudice to the underlying oneness of the human race; measures should be taken to curtail excessive poverty and wealth, to achieve a more just society; the nations of the world should reconcile and set the conditions for a universal peace; and a civilization focused on material goals can never be a source of human happiness. Spiritual needs must also be met.

The world of 2011 is a far cry from 1911. But the call of 'Abdu'l-Bahá remains timeless. The Bahá'í community, now established across the UK, is endeavouring to use this anniversary to reflect on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life, to draw inspiration from His example, and to translate the Bahá'í teachings of love and fellowship into reality.



'Abdu'l-Bahá son of Bahá'u'lláh, Head of the Faith from 1892 to 1921

TIES OF FRIENDSHIP ACROSS A CENTURY

Descendants and successors of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's British friends gather to celebrate a unique centenary event.

More than 60 people gathered at the National Bahá'í Centre, in Knightsbridge, London, on 29 September, to commemorate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the UK a century ago. Half of these were descendants and successors of those whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá had befriended during His stay. They were joined by Bahá'ís and other guests interested in His historic visit.

"This was a unique, uplifting occasion. Never before have so many descendants and successors joined together to share recollections about the experiences their forbears had with 'Abdu'l-Bahá", said Kishan Manocha, Director of the Office of Public Affairs of the UK Bahá'í community, which hosted the event.

'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the UK between 4 September and 3 October 1911. In His public talks and the acts of generosity and love He showed to all He met, He brought His Father's message of peace, love, and universal fellowship to people from the whole spectrum of society.

Guests on 29 September listened to passages from Bahá'í Writings and viewed archival materials, including correspondence and personal artefacts connected with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and those He met.

The guests were also shown an extract from *97 Cadogan Gardens*, a dramatic performance about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's time in London. The audience was visibly moved to hear accounts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ability to touch hearts and to turn even the deepest distress into profound contentment founded on the love of God.

One attendee wrote, regarding a portrait of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that hangs in the Bahá'í Centre, "And the gaze in the painting looking down – so formal, so mournful – yet beneath its exterior, a light of compassion, inviting us on." Such was the spirit that the Bahá'ís hoped to convey to the descendants and successors of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's friends in this country.



BAHÁ'ÍS CELEBRATE UK VISIT OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'

Communities around the country held prayer gatherings, story-telling evenings, walking tours and other celebrations, marking 'Abdu'l-Bahá's historic 1911 visit to the UK.

Across the country, Bahá'ís and their friends commemorated the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the United Kingdom. In London, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at St John's, Westminster, and the City Temple in Holborn. Many Bahá'ís have, in the past few months, visited these churches and other notable locations associated with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's stay, such as the Serpentine Bridge in Hyde Park. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is said to have admired the view.

Sarah Perceval, a Bahá'í from London, who had performed her play *97 Cadogan Gardens* at the 29 September reception (see left), reprised her role at other events. The play was a touching and humorous portrayal based on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit, told from the perspective of Lady Blomfield, an early British Bahá'í, who had hosted 'Abdu'l-Bahá at her Chelsea home.

Ms Perceval played the role of Lady Blomfield, sharing experiences of the Master's visit at commemorative events in London. The performances engaged audiences in a moving evocation of "the gracious figure ... the arresting personality" of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In local communities, meetings were held to celebrate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's London talks. Bahá'ís and friends read again His words on the nature of unity, the oneness of mankind, equality and the abolition of prejudice – words as relevant today as a century ago and with an inspiring timeless power. "This is a new cycle of human power," 'Abdu'l-Bahá said at City Temple on 10 September 1911. "All the horizons of the world are luminous, and the world will become indeed as a garden and a paradise. It is the hour of unity of the sons of men and of the drawing together of all races and all classes."

Uplifting programmes with prayers, songs, story-telling, discussion and hospitality drew Bahá'ís and their friends together, and offered a glimpse of the historical and spiritual significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit.

A spirit of great humour, fellowship and reverence characterised these occasions. Bahá'í communities shared their commemorations with the wider community and their local media. Bahá'ís around the UK now look forward to the centenary commemoration of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's second visit in December 2012.

Sarah Perceval performs the role of Lady Blomfield, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's host in London

SPIRITUAL VALUES AND SERVICE: THOUGHTS ON THE ENGLAND RIOTS

England's five days of riots, in August, call for a solution that recognises the latent spiritual power of young people.

Five days of riots in England this summer instigated a flurry of debate and anxious enquiry across British society. The Bahá'í community mourns the losses of those directly affected by the riots and also asks, like many others, why these tragic events took place and how society might respond. But who were these young people and why did they resort to such mindless and destructive behaviour? Some newspaper headlines denounced them as 'feral rats' and 'animals'. Others defended them as disempowered youth from an ignored underclass. Many of the rioters were indeed young people from deprived urban areas; but material poverty alone cannot explain looting and rioting.

The Bahá'í writings speak of the peace and wellbeing of a society being dependant on morality. A lack of morality inevitably leads to social breakdown. "A superficial culture unsupported by a cultivated morality is as a confused medley of dreams ... external lustre without inner perfection is like a vapour in the desert which the thirsty dreameth to be water."

Many would agree that the UK has become a materialistic and superficial culture dominated by a consumerism that promises instant gratification. There is an obsession with personal fulfilment, fed by a sense of entitlement, often to be secured at the expense and disregard of other people. Footage of the looters, insisting "we can do what we want" and expressing the need to show "the rich people and the police" they are unstoppable, outside the law, suggested that beyond issues of right and wrong, they did not see themselves as part of society.

So despite our country being a standard bearer of development and civilization, the riots indicate that we lack a sense of collective responsibility and the inner moral strength that this engenders. Across society, values are compromised for personal gain with lamentable frequency. The activities of the rioters must be seen in the context of the Parliamentarians' expenses scandal, bankers being blamed for destroying the economy, and the police accepting bribes from the press. In this light, it would appear that materialism and selfishness is a symptom of the disintegration of our society's moral framework. But in our efforts to rebuild this framework, to what do we turn?

Traditionally much of the moral framework of society has its basis in religion. The emergence of religious dogmas and the increased secularisation of our society have led to the weakening of that framework. Insights from spiritual teachings – such as the oneness of humanity and the value of service – offer a vital perspective on life that fosters

moral discipline and reinforces the value of giving time and effort for others.

Reassuringly, the riots also showed that the yearning to contribute to the betterment of society is strong. One of the most enduring post-riot images showed many from the public cleaning and reclaiming their communities. This was presented simplistically as a triumph of "the human spirit" and a victory over the rioters. And yet the commentators struggled to define what we now mean by "human nature". Who was acting most like a human being – the rioters the night before, or the volunteers the morning after?

The answer, perhaps, revolves around education. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "every child is potentially the light of the world—and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance." Further, the Bahá'í teachings offer the concept that a human being is a "mine rich in gems of inestimable value". Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, affirmed that, "education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasure and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." Each of us possesses material and spiritual gems to offer the world. Material education is well established; but the development of each person's spiritual qualities – attributes such as truthfulness, generosity and compassion – is no less important.

As the riots made clear, this is especially needed for the young. Indeed, the power just some youth had to bring several cities to a standstill begs the question of what the youth of the UK could achieve if their energies were channelled towards constructive ends. But how can the energy of youth be harnessed? How can they be assisted to give their time and energy for the benefit of others? How can the requisite understanding of the interdependence of individual and collective welfare be successfully conveyed?

These questions confront us all. Bahá'ís across the UK are endeavouring to respond to this challenge by implementing an educational process which recognises that positive individual and collective change need to happen together. Service to society – so sorely needed in today's world – is the vital link that enables both to occur.

The process comprises classes for children, youth groups, and study activities for adults, from all backgrounds, in which participants' capacities for service are developed and their realities – their lives, their communities, the needs of each – are thoroughly explored. They are conducted in a way that generates community bonds among diverse peoples, that replaces apathy and resignation with confidence in a community's ability to effect change, and helps all participants see how they can make a positive impact as members of one human family.

The responsibility is grave. Humanity can and must rise above its volatile, fragmented state. But reaching collective maturity will require us to develop our God-given capacities, by creating a culture of moral consciousness that is world-embracing in scope, peaceful and unifying in character. Such a vision is surely the longing of every heart – and hopefully these activities, offered by the Bahá'ís, can help make this vision a reality.

BAHÁ'ÍS IN IRAN DENIED HIGHER EDUCATION

Iranian authorities have barred Bahá'ís access to university since 1979. Now, even an informal educational programme run by the Bahá'ís has been targeted by the government.

The tide of persecution in Iran is rising. In a fresh wave of attacks against the Bahá'í community, three women were arrested on spurious charges of activity against national security following terrifying raids on 16 homes in the city of Rasht. In Semnan, around 10 Bahá'í-owned shops were sealed up by authorities. Business licences were cancelled. Such tactics are moves in an ongoing campaign to impoverish Iranian Bahá'ís and make their lives untenable.

These abuses underline the recent statement of Dr Heiner Bielefeldt, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, that Iran's persecution of the Bahá'ís is among the most "extreme manifestations of religious intolerance and persecution" in the world today.

Experience shows that Tehran is shrewd, vindictive, and dishonest enough, to ramp-up persecution while the world's attention is diverted. Syria and the nuclear question must not push Iran's human rights tragedy off the agenda.

Oppression in Iran is widespread; women's activists, political activists, Kurds, Sunnis, others whose views are not shared by the state, and even the lawyers who defend them, suffer at the hands of the government's security and legal apparatus. The recent sentencing to death for apostasy of Youcef Nardakhani, a Christian pastor, on the basis of his Muslim ancestry, is a stark example of the contempt with which the government holds the rights of its people. The rank hypocrisy of President Ahmadinejad's recent assertion of Iran's "ethics, humanity, solidarity and justice" on the world stage is plain to see.

For the Bahá'ís - a community comprising adherents from all areas and strata of Iranian society - new and mounting afflictions are being endured. Seven Bahá'í educators, who were teaching young Bahá'ís denied access to universities as a matter of policy, were sentenced in September to jail terms of four or five years apiece. The charge - that they threatened state security by offering education in the sciences and arts - is patently absurd. It is a blatant act of religious discrimination and a calculated manoeuvre to make the community's existence unviable. Iran's prohibition on the attendance of foreign diplomats at the trial, and its refusal to provide written documentation of the verdict, betrays only its own guilt.

Little wonder, then, that on 3 November, the UN Human Rights Committee criticized Iran's non-compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the country is a state party. An Iranian delegation protested its innocence, claiming that, "no Iranian citizen enjoys priority over others due to his/

her race, religion or particular language."

No one should be fooled by Iran's protestations. Since Iran's military and security agencies were instructed to monitor the Bahá'í community in 2005, there has been a marked rise in arrests and persecution. In 2004 four Bahá'ís were imprisoned. Since then, 500 have been arrested. More than a hundred Bahá'ís are currently behind bars. This includes the community's national leadership, found guilty of crimes their lawyer, Nobel laureate Dr Shirin Ebadi, said were without evidence. Raids, arrests, confiscation of property, arbitrary and exorbitant bail costs, denial of access to education, and desecration of graves: these violations have escalated to desperate levels.

And the government has gone further. Recently in Sanandaj, the authorities attempted to persuade Bahá'ís to undertake not to participate in regular gatherings that are a fundamental part of Bahá'í community life. This is analogous to pressuring Christians to stop going to Church on Sunday. It is an egregious step-change in the government's efforts to dismantle every aspect of Bahá'í life, from the leadership down to the grassroots.

What is more, the government incites hatred against the Bahá'ís from the wider population. The Bahá'í International Community last month released a report on a media campaign that demonizes and vilifies the Bahá'ís. Sanctioned by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself, who identified the Bahá'ís as "enemies of Islam" in a speech on 19 October 2010, Bahá'ís are branded variously as "others", as spies, as the promoters of obscene immorality and armed rebellion, and as the controllers of foreign media such as the BBC. They are the scapegoats for every social ill. Invoking a gross distortion of history, the Bahá'ís are portrayed as a "misguided sect" or as agents of Western and Zionist imperialism. Often they are depicted as ghouls. They are linked to Satanists, the Shah's secret police, and other organisations inimical to the state. And yet Bahá'í teachings promote peace and unity. Bahá'ís are spiritually obliged to abide by the law. Eschewing opposition to the government, and refusing the mantle of victimhood, they strive as they have always done to contribute to the betterment of their society.

Iran's intention to extinguish the Bahá'í community is clear. More than 200 Bahá'ís have been executed for their beliefs since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. International scrutiny and pressure has, for now, forced Iran to change tactics; but the government's campaign to squeeze the life out of the Bahá'í community is otherwise escalating and taking on new forms. It is attempting nothing less than a bloodless elimination of a significant section of its citizens.

The parallels between recent events and state-sponsored, anti-religious campaigns of the past are undeniable. History shows that such campaigns are the precursors of actual violence against religious minorities. Iranian Bahá'ís have good reason to be concerned that these assaults could presage a wider attack. The world has a duty to protect them. To look away now would allow the rising tide of persecution drown out the hope of justice in Iran.

HOUSE OF COMMONS SEMINAR ON IRAN HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS

MPs, human rights experts and comedian Omid Djalili met to speak about human rights violations in Iran

In June, Iran's human rights record was scrutinised at a House of Commons seminar, attended by Members of Parliament, human rights experts and activists. It was hosted by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Friends of the Bahá'ís, human rights groups United4Iran, and Christian Solidarity Worldwide. The event's speakers made clear that the aim of such exposure was not to trump other human rights issues around the world but for Iran's human rights situation to get the attention it needs. Rich yet troubling presentations from Nazila Ghanea, Khataza Gondwe, Mike Gapes MP, Shadi Sadr and Omid Djalili, and chaired by Louise Ellman MP, highlighted the severity of the ongoing abuse of human rights in Iran.

The need to be "guarded, sensitive and tactical" infused the concern expressed by Mr Gapes, who emphasised the great potential of Iran as a participant in an ever-advancing global community. The overwhelming concern at present is not that this potential is being wasted, he said, but that the systematic oppression, torture, and execution of Iranian minorities are being instigated by the government itself.

"It is no exaggeration that the human rights situation in Iran is in crisis," said Dr Ghanea, a lecturer at the University of Oxford and an editor of the *Journal of Religion & Human Rights*. Dr Ghanea charged the Iranian government with being "the main engine of intolerance, hate and persecution," saying that the systematic campaign of persecution against Bahá'ís, and the imprisonment and torture of all minorities or vulnerable individuals, are "instigated and perpetuated" by the authorities.

The government is "continually sending memoranda, laws, instructions and threats to civil servants, to universities, to teachers, to private businesses, instructing them to get rid of staff, students, and other individuals, who belong to 'deviant' groups, who are Bahá'ís, or who are politically active," said Dr Ghanea. Children are humiliated and bullied in schools, she added, "not by other children, but under instruction of government authorities and by their teachers."

Dr Ghanea noted that this repression is now targeting a "wider and wider profile of people who are allegedly dissidents." In its prejudice against nearly the entire population, she said, "the Iranian regime had failed ... to recognise the rich diversity of Iranian civilisation."

Women's rights activist and lawyer Shadi Sadr, who was imprisoned in Iran, spoke of the grievous situation of women prisoners. They are "deprived of many rights that are given to them ... in accordance with international law

... and the laws of Iran," she said. Ms Sadr also said that the extreme violence faced by women prisoners during interrogation inhibited the activism of women.

There has also been increased persecution against Iranian Christians. Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Khataza Gondwe referred to the authorities' use of hate speech against minorities, citing a "prolific outpouring of inflammatory rhetoric" against Christians. According to Dr Gondwe, the rhetoric claims that Christians had "inserted themselves into Islam like a parasite," and were part of "perverted cults" and "foreign conspiracies."

Recalling the warmth and hospitality of ordinary Iranians he met during his visits to the country, Mr Gapes, a former member of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee, contrasted the behaviour of the government in the interests of "security" with a "young, dynamic, vibrant society" that wants to "engage with the world." Only when the Iranian government recognises all of its ethnic and religious groups, and accords them equal rights, will Iran's security be assured, he said.

"The biggest security is human security," he said.

The seminar was one of many activities around the world to mark the third anniversary of the arrest of Iran's seven Bahá'í leaders. They were detained on baseless charges, convicted without evidence and in violation of due process, and are now each serving 20-year jail sentences.

A message sent to the seminar from leading human rights barrister, Cherie Blair QC, said Iran's imprisonment of the seven "shames the country's leaders." Mrs Blair called for the Iranian authorities to "free the Bahá'í leaders and comply with their commitment to religious freedom."

Mr Djalili, an Anglo-Iranian actor and comedian, who is also a Bahá'í, said that the seven were "holding on to their personalities and their identities" by staying true to their principles and faith. Mr Djalili also praised the fortitude and perseverance of the entire Iranian Bahá'í community.

Kishan Manocha, Director of the Office of Public Affairs of the UK Bahá'í community, said that the seminar "underlines the extent of the human rights crisis in Iran, and it reminds us that not only Bahá'ís but other religious minorities, women, journalists and others are subject to ongoing human rights violations."



Omid Djalili (right) and Khataza Gondwe

SCOTTISH BAHÁ'ÍS INAUGURATE NEW CENTRE FOR EDINBURGH

Kenny MacAskill MSP was the guest of honour at an opening ceremony for a new Bahá'í contribution to Scotland

In May, the Bahá'í community of Edinburgh opened a new Bahá'í Centre to the Scottish public. The Georgian building, purchased in 2005, was refurbished and redecorated for its new purpose: to serve as a venue for the Scottish Bahá'í community's events, and to offer Scotland a venue for devotional programmes, interfaith events, special receptions, and other community activities.

A reception to host the opening of the Edinburgh



The plaque of Edinburgh's new Bahá'í Centre

Bahá'í Centre was held on 23 May, the date that marks the inception of the Bahá'í Faith in Persia in 1844, when the Báb declared Himself as a Manifestation of God and His mission as a Forerunner to Bahá'u'lláh. Scratched on a window of one of the new Centre's rooms is a date, written by one of the buildings first residents – "2nd May 1863". Today it serves as a poetic reminder of the same period that marked Bahá'u'lláh's founding of a new faith.

Kenny MacAskill MSP, Secretary for Justice in the Scottish cabinet, was guest of honour and offered congratulatory remarks to the Bahá'í community on behalf of the Scottish executive. Mr MacAskill spoke passionately about the need for religious tolerance and he praised Scottish efforts against sectarianism.

Maureen Sier, a representative of the Bahá'í community in Scotland, welcomed Mr MacAskill and the numerous interfaith and official guests. "We are a community inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh," said Mrs Sier, "and we are a community engaged in learning with others about how to contribute to the material and spiritual progress of Scottish and UK society." Representatives of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Edinburgh, the governing body of the Edinburgh

Bahá'í community, also addressed the gathering. All of the speakers looked forward to the Edinburgh Bahá'í Centre becoming a venue in which to engage with communities on plans for the betterment of Scottish society.

The celebration included readings from the Bahá'í writings and musical performances by noted violinist Carolyn Sparey, a Scottish Bahá'í, and by a young harpist from the Edinburgh Bahá'í community.

Bahá'ís in Scotland hope that the new Centre will reinforce their efforts, made alongside their neighbours and friends, to reach out to all parts of Scottish society, through the community-building activities in which they are engaged, to share with them the vision of the harmonious, just, and peaceful society envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh.

The opening of the Edinburgh Bahá'í Centre comes at a moment of historical reflection for British Bahá'ís. A century ago, in 1911, and again in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the UK (see page 3). He visited Edinburgh between 6 January and 10 January 1913. He stayed at the home of Alexander Whyte, a prominent minister of the United Free Church of Scotland, and Elizabeth Whyte, who was probably the first native Scot to become a Bahá'í. His itinerary included addresses at the Theosophical Society and to large audiences at Freemason's Hall and Rainy Hall, where He spoke on such themes as the independent investigation of truth, the immortality of the soul, and the need for an international language.

A number of archival items, dating to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit, were on display during the event. A portrait of John Esslemont, an outstanding member of the early Scottish Bahá'í community, was displayed alongside belongings of Charles Dunning, the first Bahá'í to settle in the Orkney Islands. The 1948 declaration of the first Spiritual Assembly of Edinburgh, was also included.

During His stay, 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw a performance of Handel's Messiah at St Giles' Cathedral; and He visited Outlook Tower, the Edinburgh College of Art, North Canongate School and St Saviour's Kindergarten. In late 2012, the new Edinburgh Centre will host remembrances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Scotland exactly 100 years ago.



Guests at the opening of the Edinburgh Bahá'í Centre

EGYPTIAN BAHÁ'ÍS LOOK TO THE FUTURE OF THEIR COUNTRY

An open letter from Egyptian Bahá'ís to their compatriots, published in April 2010, offers spiritual and social principles for a new Egypt. This is an extract of the full letter.

Recent events have provided us, the Bahá'ís of Egypt, with an opportunity we have never experienced before: to communicate directly with our brothers and sisters. We rejoice in the fact that we are able to make a humble contribution and to share some perspectives, drawn from our own experience and that of Bahá'ís throughout the world, for walking the path towards lasting material and spiritual prosperity.

Egypt's rapid change demonstrates the collective desire to exercise greater control over our destiny. This freedom is unfamiliar to us. But the fact that, as a people, we have chosen to become actively involved in determining the direction of our nation is a sign that our society has reached a new stage in its development.

Events in Egypt can be seen as a response to forces that are, in fact, drawing the entire human race towards greater maturity and interdependence. One indication that humanity is advancing in this direction is that conduct which did not seem out of place in an earlier age—behaviours that resulted in conflict, corruption, and inequality—are increasingly seen as incompatible with the values that underpin a just society.

At this juncture, then, we face the weighty question of what we seek to achieve. Many social models are on offer. Are we to move towards an individualistic, fragmented society, wherein all feel liberated to pursue their own interests, even at the expense of the common good? Will we be tempted by the lures of materialism and consumerism? Will we opt for religious fanaticism? Are we prepared to allow an elite to ignore our collective aspirations and manipulate our desire for change? Or, will the process of change be allowed to lose momentum?

It might be argued that the world wants for a successful model of society worthy of emulation. Thus, if no existing model is satisfactory, we might consider a different course, and perhaps demonstrate that a new, truly progressive approach to the organisation of society is possible.

A mature society demonstrates one feature above all others: a recognition of the oneness of humanity. To develop institutions, agencies, and social structures that promote the oneness of humanity is a great challenge. Far from being an expression of vague and pious hope, this principle informs the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. Its genesis lies in the recognition that we were all created by the one Creator, and it is indefensible

for one person, tribe, or nation to claim superiority over another. Its acceptance would require an organic change in the structure of society, a change with far-reaching consequences for every aspect of our collective life. And beyond its societal implications, it calls for a profound re-examination of each of our own attitudes, values, and relationships with others—ultimately, for a transformation in the human heart. None of us are exempt from its exacting demands.

The ramifications of the oneness of humanity are so profound that many other vital principles can be derived from it. A prime example is the equality of men and women. Does anything retard progress more than the persistent exclusion of women from full participation in the affairs of the nation?

Nowhere could the equality of the sexes more helpfully be established than in education, which exists to enable men and women of every background to fulfil their innate potential to contribute to the progress of society. If it is to succeed, it must prepare students for participation in the economic life of the nation; and it must possess a robust moral dimension. Schools must impress upon their students the responsibilities of being a citizen, and inculcate values of the betterment of society and care for one's fellow human beings. Education can also protect future generations from the blight of corruption. Access to basic education must be universal, regardless of any distinctions based on gender, ethnicity, or means.

Related to education is the interaction between science and religion, twin sources of insight that humanity can draw upon to achieve progress. It is a blessing that Egyptian society, as a whole, does not assume the two must be in conflict. We possess a proud history of fostering a spirit of rational and scientific enquiry while retaining a strong religious tradition. All of us, especially our younger generation, can know that individuals may be imbued with sincere spirituality while labouring for the material progress of their nation.

Our nation is blessed by an abundance of youth. Conditions must be nurtured so that opportunities for meaningful employment multiply, talent is harnessed, and advancement is achieved on the basis of merit, not privilege. Disenchantment will grow if youth are thwarted from improving the conditions of families, communities, and neighbourhoods. The high aspirations of the young represent a trust that society cannot afford, either economically or morally, to ignore.

Pre-eminent among the principles that should propel this renewal is justice. Its far-reaching implications are at the core of the issues on which we must agree. And it is from the interplay of the two vital principles of justice and the oneness of humanity that an important truth emerges: each individual comes into the world as a trust of the whole, and the collective resources of the human race should be expended for the benefit of all, not the few.

To read the full letter, please visit: <http://www.bahai-egypt.org/2011/04/open-letter-to-people-of-egypt.html>

BAHÁ'ÍS HOLD MEMORIAL FOR PAKISTANI MINISTER SHAHBAZ BHATTI

A passionate advocate for the rights of minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti (1968-2011) was a principled Pakistani minister whose death was a tragedy for his country.



Shahbaz Bhatti was a principled defender of minorities

On 2 March 2011 in Islamabad, Pakistan, Shahbaz Bhatti – the Pakistani Federal Minister for Minority Affairs – lost his life as a result of his defence of the rights of minority rights, and his criticism of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws. Mr Bhatti was a Roman Catholic and the only Christian in the Cabinet. He was an outspoken critic of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, the subject of ongoing controversy in the country, a position that prompted the Taliban to issue death threats against him from 2009 and motivated their final attack.

Mr Bhatti’s death was a tragedy for Pakistan. Politicians and civil society activists the world over praised his work for religious tolerance and mourned his death. ...

At the National Bahá’í Centre in London, on 24 March, a representative of the Pakistani High Commission, joined by members of faith groups and NGOs, attended memorial prayers for Mr Bhatti.

Prayers and readings were offered by attendees from the Christian, Muslim and Bahá’í sacred writings. Mr Siyyid Kiani, Minister of Community Welfare at the Pakistani High Commission to the United Kingdom, led the eulogies and remembrances for Mr Bhatti. Wilson Chowdhry, of the British Pakistani Christian Association, David Griffiths of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and John Bosco of the Church of England, also offered remembrances and tributes to Mr Bhatti.

Mr Kiani pledged the ongoing efforts to the Pakistani government to improve the lives of Pakistanis and to fight religious extremism. John Bosco called Mr Bhatti a “martyr” and likened him to St Paul. Mr Chowdhry called on Pakistanis to remember the common threads running between the religions, while Mr Griffiths remembered Mr Bhatti’s assistance to his organisation and his devotion to the cause of minority rights in Pakistan.

Kishan Manocha, Director of the Office of Public Affairs of the UK Bahá’í community, said that the

memorial was convened to pray for the progress of Mr Bhatti’s soul in the afterlife. Bahá’ís believe that when people pass away, their good works in this world aid their progress in the next world, and that the prayers of loved ones can help further the progress of individuals who have entered the spiritual realm. Dr Manocha noted that, in the Bahá’í teachings, we are encouraged to pray for those who have died. “As we pray for departed souls,” he said, “they too pray for people in this physical life.”

Shahbaz Bhatti was a friend to many minorities in Pakistan, including the Bahá’í community, with which he had conducted many meaningful and constructive interactions. Pakistani Bahá’ís, and their coreligionists around the world, will miss a principled individual who worked for the common good of Pakistan.

“Pakistan’s loss is our loss,” said Dr Manocha. Shahbaz Bhatti had often spoken of what was needed to help Pakistan overcome its struggle with extremism. The United Kingdom, he said, must set an example in the life of its own society. Embrace otherness, he said. By working for true unity in UK society, this country can help other countries realise a more positive vision for the future.

SEEKING FOR TRUTH CAN NEVER BE A CRIME

Searching for truth defines what it means to be human. But many governments in the world have made changing religion or belief a crime. It is a contradiction that cannot last.

Apostasy and issues surrounding conversion today present one of the most pressing threats to the freedom of religion or belief around the world – in particular, the right to change one’s religion and the right to teach one’s beliefs. Defined as the “abandonment or renunciation of a religious belief or principle”, apostasy stems from the individual conscience and decision to change religion (or belief) and it is a crime in 14 countries, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. In some of these countries apostasy is punishable by death. But even where it is not a crime, it nevertheless carries a social stigma and is an impediment to the full enjoyment of human rights. In Pakistan, blasphemy is a capital offence; the Christian farmhand Asia Bibi is on death row for allegedly making derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad.

Religious dogma plays a role in stirring the controversy. Some Christian circles, for instance, maintain that Christianity must retain the right to seek and receive converts – even where this may be seen as a form of cultural or spiritual aggression. In India, anti-conversion laws aimed at “protecting” the Hindu majority have been passed in recent months. These laws penalise both the

“converter” and the person converting. Other South Asian states have imposed similar legal bans.

In most societies, the reasons that conversion causes controversy have little to do with dogma, and much to do with power structures – within the family or the state – and politics. Conversion has social and political, as well as spiritual, implications. Religion and belief are intimately associated, in many parts of the world, with issues of identity, status and collective belonging. Belief is not limited to matters of private and personal conscience. Conversion will never be a purely individual matter when one religious community is at odds or in conflict with another. When religion and authority are bound together, changes of spiritual allegiance cause shockwaves.

And yet the freedom of religion or belief, including to change these beliefs, is a morally essential human right that deserves unconditional protection. Human beings must be free to enthusiastically and freely share their beliefs with other people, with a view to inviting – but never compelling – others to join the same religious path.

To be human is to search for truth. This search requires freedom of conscience – the ability to examine the validity of all belief systems and to choose, practice and change one’s beliefs. This last freedom, to change our religion, is especially critical because if human beings are to act ethically, people must always be free to search out the truth for themselves. No obstacles can be imposed by dominant religious or political ideologies: nothing can interfere with this innate human right that cuts to the core of our humanity. And intimately connected with the freedom to hold and change one’s beliefs is the freedom to share them with another person – otherwise from where might people find the ideals and truths that they seek?

Governments have recognised the importance of the right to change religion or belief in various international instruments. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly protects the right to change religion or belief. Yet there has been a gradual emasculation of the unequivocal statements of these rights in recent years. In March 2011, attempts to insert the right to change belief in a resolution before the Human Rights Council at the United Nations, were unsuccessful.

The alarming increase in legal sanctions against apostasy may be the consequence of several trends. One is the polarisation in debates over the universality of human rights versus cultural relativity. In these exchanges, religious or cultural particularities sometimes trump international human rights standards. A second reason is the retreat of nation-states to more conservative interpretations of religion, as the basis of ensuring solidarity and loyalty within their realms. Punishing apostasy, then, may be a reaction to a sense of being “under siege” – rather than being a question of religious orthodoxy.

The danger of not combating the challenges posed by apostasy is dire. The question of apostasy under Islam requires special care. There are many people in Muslim countries today who wish to reform or restrict the punishment of apostasy. Indeed, the Quranic injunction of

“no compulsion in religion” is clearly at odds with a practice of imposing the death penalty for apostasy.

Yet even where there is a legal and cultural possibility of changing apostasy laws under Islam, a more daunting political challenge remains unresolved. How can such change be effected without causing a fracture in the Muslim world, by unnecessarily putting the status quo against ideals of reform? To resolve the debate, questions on conversion and change of religion must confront various misunderstandings, prejudices and fears about why people change their beliefs and why people seek to persuade their friends to change faith.

“Conversion” itself is a loaded term, suggesting aggressive proselytism and impiety against one religion by another. But the phenomenon in question is that pivotal moment in a human being’s life, a spiritually significant event, when an exploration of religious truth results in a new experience of faith and a new understanding of the world. And this phenomenon is safeguarded in human rights. International law offers protection for the freedom to teach one’s religious faith.

The root question is, of course, what is meant by religion – and how religion relates to the question of identity. Religion clearly cannot be divorced from issues of cultural and political reality. Identity is a basic human need, and religion is often used as a source of personal and communal identity. It can create bonds of fellowship and harmony between races and cultures. But it can also be used by groups to separate themselves from others.

Yet religion amounts to much more than this. It has the power to raise individuals and groups beyond narrow conceptions of reality and identity. At one level, it is about the personal investigation of reality using the faculties of both faith and reason and the process of individual transformation that this sets in motion. But at the same time, it is also a force for profound social change, animated by the principle of human divinity and oneness, and it offers a sublime vision for human progress.

Being “religious” should not be a matter of existing comfortably within a particular faith group. Should it not be about seeing oneself as an agent for positive change at the heart of society? If an individual’s fulfilment is realised through understanding and addressing the needs of the society in which he or she lives, then this will inevitably entail a broadening of one’s sense of identity.

Religion must never be reduced to following tradition or inheriting narrow identities. This risks quarantining entire populations from any exposure to new ways of looking at reality and the opportunity to embrace a wider sense of identity. And in light of this proper understanding of religion, what could then constitute legitimate government action in limiting the freedom to the share of one’s religious beliefs? Individual and collective progress requires a constant willingness to listen to the views of others and reconsider initial beliefs and opinions. This process would be impossible if it cannot include meaningful conversations of spiritual import, including the sharing of deeply held spiritual convictions.